

Mahabharata Study Guide

The *Mahabharata* is an ancient Sanskrit poem describing the mythical Kurukshetra War between two sets of brothers descended from the king Bharata: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It is considered so historically important to the Hindu tradition that it is sometimes referred to as the "fifth Veda." The four Vedas are the foundational texts of Hinduism, outlining tenets of the faith and doctrines for living, but none of them discuss the tenet of dharma.

The *Mahabharata* takes dharma as its central theme, and the principle is discussed at length in the portion known as the Bhagavad Gita and in Bhishma's extensive conversation with Yudhishthira. The Bhagavad Gita on its own has long been considered a vital text in Hindu philosophy, influencing thinkers as recent as Mohandas Gandhi in the 20th century.

In its written and unabridged form, the poem is composed of 100,000 verses, making it the longest of all the ancient epic tales. Yet, unlike the Vedic texts, which are considered to have been passed down and copied pristinely down to the letter throughout the ages, the *Mahabharata* did not initially manifest as a written work. Instead, the tale was passed down through an oral tradition, meaning that the version we have now is something of a hodge-podge of various versions and revisions made by its tellers. In this sense, the *Mahabharata* is similar to the Greek war epic the *Iliad*, which was passed down orally until being committed to writing around the 8th century BC, roughly the same period when the *Mahabharata* began taking shape.

This oral tradition is reflected in the text of the *Mahabharata* itself, as every single story told is told *by* one person *to* another person. The entire epic itself is framed as being recited by a single storyteller.

Scholarship on the *Mahabharata* tends to note that the text is intended to be encyclopedic, touching on everything from the tenets of dharma to the responsibilities of a king to the true nature of women. And while it is the only ancient Hindu text that takes a narrative form, it is laden with didactic, philosophical segments, be they in the form of allegorical fables or didactic discourse between its characters. Therefore, the *Mahabharata* is part epic poem, part Hindu philosophical treatise.

Mahabharata Summary

Book 1: Beginnings

We begin during the rule of Bharata, when everyone on Earth follows dharma. His lineage is traced to two sons: Dhrtarastra, who is blind and cannot inherit the throne, and Pandu, who becomes king. Pandu has one illegitimate son he must give up to be raised as a Suta and five sons to call his own, and all six are gods incarnate. Dhrtarastra has 100 sons (called Kauravas), all demons. Pandu's five sons [Arjuna](#), [Bhima](#), Yudhishthira, Nakula, and Sahadeva are all great warriors or great kings, and marry the princess [Draupadi](#). Dhrtarastra's son [Duryodhana](#) leads the other 99 brothers, and has a seething hatred for the Pandavas, or Pandu's sons. Both Yudhishthira and Duryodhana are granted kingdoms by Dhrtarastra.

Book 2: The Hall

After Yudhishthira is consecrated as king, Duryodhana schemes to take his kingdom. So, Duryodhana challenges Yudhishthira to a dice game. Duryodhana implores Yudhishthira to participate, and Yudhishthira determines that it's his dharma to play despite being a terrible gambler. He gradually gambles away his entire kingdom and the freedom of his wife, but Dhrtarastra commands Duryodhana to give Yudhishthira one more change. Duryodhana agrees, saying that if Yudhishthira loses he and the other Pandavas must live in exile for 12 years and spend a 13th year in disguise, and if they're recognized, they must spend another 12 years in exile. Yudhishthira loses.

Book 3: The Forest

The brothers and Draupadi spend the 12 years of exile in the forest, studying with Brahmins and training. During this period of time, Arjuna is granted a celestial weapon by the god Indra. Draupadi is kidnapped and brought back.

Book 4: Virata

During their 13th year, the Pandavas take refuge in the king Virata's palace, posing as former subjects of Yudhisthira. Draupadi poses as a maidservant to maintain her independence. It's an eventful year, with a rape attempt on Draupadi that leads to Bhima slaughtering all of the aggressor's supporters and Arjuna helping Virata's son win back cattle from thieves. The brothers make it through the 13th year undetected despite these showy adventures.

Book 5: Perseverance

Yudhisthira returns to take his kingdom back, but learns Duryodhana has no intention of turning it over. Duryodhana clearly wants war, but [Krsna](#) advises Yudhisthira to ask for a peaceful transfer of power first. Duryodhana denies this peaceful transfer, clearly desiring war despite being chided by everyone close to him. The two sides prepare for war. Duryodhana appoints Bhima his commander. Krsna tells the Yudhisthira that even though he will equip Duryodhana with soldiers, he will side with the Pandavas.

Book 6: Bhishma

At the beginning of the battle, Arjuna asks Krsna for permission to throw down his arms since he does not want to slay his kind. Krsna recites the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, explaining the tenets of dharma and action, and specifically Arjuna's duty to fight in this war with a preordained outcome. After a sustained conflict between Arjuna and Krsna, Arjuna finally kills Bhishma on the 10th day of the war, and Bhishma chooses to lay on a bed of arrows and delay the date of his death.

Book 7: [Drona](#)

Drona, Arjuna's former military trainer, is appointed the new commander of Duryodhana's army. He is a fearsome fighter, so the Pandavas devise a plan to trick Drona into defying his dharma, making himself ready to die. Yudhisthira tells Drona that Bhima killed Asvatthaman, which is the name of Drona's son. In reality, Bhima killed an elephant named Asvatthaman. Drona flies into a fit of rage and violates his dharma by massacring soldiers he shouldn't kill. When he realizes what has happened, he lays down his arms and accepts his death.

Book 8: [Karna](#)

Duryodhana begins to grasp that his campaign is doomed, but at Karna's request, he appoints Karna the new commander of his army. Karna and Arjuna meet on the battlefield in a bloody exchange, in which Karna is slowly brutalized and killed.

Book 9: Salya

Salya is appointed the next and, ultimately, final commander of Duryodhana's army. He is quickly killed by Yudhisthira. Duryodhana flees to hide in a lake, knowing the end of the war is imminent, but the Pandavas find him. Bhima kills him in a match with clubs, using an unfair strike. Despite the protests of observers and Duryodhana himself, Krsna ordains the strike, saying it was within Bhima's dharma and that Duryodhana had acted in adharma by instigating the war.

Book 10: The Night-Raid

Among the handful of Kauravas surviving, Asvatthaman sneaks into the Pandavas' camp and massacres everyone in it, some of them in such a way that they do not die a proper warrior's death and can't attain heaven. As he leaves, he places a curse on Pandava wombs, making them barren.

Book 11: The Women

Yudhisthira visits Dhrtarastra, who is mourning over the death of all of his sons. Likewise, the Kauravas' wives confront Yudhisthira about massacring their husbands. When Dhrtarastra sees Bhima, he tries to kill him, but Krsna tricks Dhrtarastra into attacking an effigy of Bhima instead. There is a funeral pyre for the Kauravas and then a ritual at the Ganga river. At the Ganga, Yudhisthira learns that Karna was his brother, and plunges into grief.

Book 12: Tranquility

Yudhisthira is ambivalent about taking his throne, but agrees to it to honor Dhrtarastra. The Pandavas travel to visit the dying Bhishma, who asks for a pillow from Arjuna, but means that he wants more arrows to rest his head on. Bhishma begins a philosophical conversation with Yudhisthira on his duties as a king and the nature of dharma.

Book 13: Instruction

Bhishma's and Yudhisthira's conversation continues, as they talk about how to live well and abide by dharma, as well as about women. Bhishma tells Duryodhana that he should consider the Pandavas his own sons, and forget about his wicked sons that have gone to hell. Bhishma dies and is cremated.

Book 14: The Horse Sacrifice

Yudhisthira hesitates to resume ruling, but Krsna instructs him to undertake a horse sacrifice ritual to cleanse the world. Arjuna rides the white horse that will be sacrificed around the former sites of battle and fends off various aggressors. After the journey, the horse and many other animals are sacrificed in a pyre, and the smoke from the horse's burning intestinal sac does the purifying.

Book 15: The Hermitage

Dhrtarastra and his wife Gandhari, along with the Pandavas' mother Kunti and some others, retreat to a forest hermitage to live out their days as ascetics. The Pandavas miss their mother sorely and organize a trip to visit the elders. Shortly after their trip, their elders burn to death in a sacred fire lit by Dhrtarastra.

Book 16: The Clubs

We read the tale of the Vrsni who descend into sin when they learn of their demise by time. Krsna is himself killed by a hunter named Jara, which is Sanskrit for "old age." He ascends and rejoins the gods. Without Krsna, Arjuna is unable to defend the Vrsni women from a kidnapping by a pack of thieves. He returns to tell his brothers of his defeat.

Book 17: The Great Journey

With Krsna dead, Yudhisthira decides it is his time to die as well. He leaves the throne to Pariksit, and he and his brothers set out on a journey to travel the world. In the mountains, the brothers and Draupadi die one by one. When Yudhisthira is met by Indra to be taken in a chariot to heaven, Yudhisthira refuses to leave his dog behind, since it was loyal to him. The dog transforms into the god of dharma and praises Yudhisthira for his virtuousness.

Book 18: The Ascent to Heaven

Yudhisthira only finds Duryodhana in heaven and is baffled. He demands to be taken to where his brothers are, so he is taken to hell. There, Yudhisthira says he will stay with his brothers instead of choosing to go to heaven. Indra informs him that this was the final test that he passed, and he and all the Pandavas are sent to heaven, while Duryodhana is condemned to hell.

Mahabharata Character List

Yudhishtira

The eldest of the Pandava brothers, Yudhisthira is their leader as both king and commander in battle. A bad series of dice games he plays lands him, his wife, and his brothers in exile for 13 years, which precipitates a war between the Pandavas and Duryodhana. Yudhisthira is described as living fully by dharma, and in turn always has the gods on his side.

Arjuna

One of the Pandavas brothers, Arjuna is dubbed the "wealth-winner." He is the greatest warrior of all the brothers, having been trained by his future military opponent Drona. Arjuna is a skilled archer and popular with women.

Karna

Karna is technically the oldest of the Pandava brothers, but was raised by adoptive parents, and therefore does not consider himself part of the family. He fights alongside Duryodhana, and is ultimately killed by Arjuna. The Pandavas are devastated to later learn that Karna was one of their own.

Dhritarashtra

The blind king of Hastinapur who believes his blindness is a curse upon him, he gives birth to 100 sons who are demons incarnate. The most powerful of these sons is Duryodhana, who leads the 100 brothers into war against the Pandavas. From early on, Dhritarashtra is well aware that fate is working against Duryodhana, and the blind king pleads with his son over and over to compromise with the Pandavas, lest he violate dharma.

Draupadi

The wife of the five Pandava brothers, Draupadi is a celebrated princess who is widely regarded as the most beautiful woman in the world. During their years in exile, Draupadi must pose as a maidservant and suffer a series of indignities, including an attempted rape by one of Duryodhana's brothers. The humiliation she suffers ends up being one of the causes of the great battle that the *Mahabharata* revolves around.

Duryodhana

The leader of 100 demon brothers who are all born of the blind king Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana is portrayed as living in flagrant violation of dharma. He is motivated by greed, jealousy, and a desire for retribution, tricking Yudhishthira into a dice game that ultimately robs the Pandavas of their kingdom, and gladly engaging them in war when they return from exile and seek what is rightfully theirs. Duryodhana hides in a lake after all his warriors are killed, and is ultimately killed by Bhima. In the afterlife, he resides in hell.

Bhima

The strongest of the Pandavas, Bhima is often the brother who kills the brothers' greatest enemies and protectors from their most skilled aggressors. Bhima is often described as "wolf-bellied" and is ruthless in acts of violence.

Krishna

The god who assists the Pandavas throughout the story, Krishna helps them understand their *dharma* as rulers and fighters in the war, and constantly reassures them that any violent act they have trepidation about is mandated by faith. His speech on dharma and action to Arjuna is known as the "Bhagavad Gita," and has been accepted as central to the Hindu tradition alongside the traditional Vedic texts.

Drona

At the time of the story, Drona is an 85-year-old man who fights like a 16-year-old. Even though he fights on behalf of Duryodhana, he shares a close bond with the Pandavas, having trained Arjuna as a warrior. Like many in Duryodhana's army, and unlike Duryodhana himself, Drona is a strict adherent of dharma, and lays down his weapons to accept his death at the Pandava's hand when he violates his dharma on the battlefield.

Vyasa

As depicted in the story, Vyasa is the narrator of the entirety of the Mahabharata epic, dictating the tale to Ganesh. The historical Vyasa is popularly considered to have written the Mahabharata and is considered one of the seven immortal beings in the Hindu tradition.

Mahabharata Glossary

Abhishiva

a religious rite

Dharma

The specific role and responsibilities a person is fated to have, exclusive to that person and specific to his caste. It can only be satisfied through action.

Adharma

Living in wicked defiance of one's dharma, often choosing instead to live by greed or envy.

Caste System

The Hindu class system, determined by birth.

Ksatriya

The caste made up of warriors and rulers.

Brahmin

The highest caste, made up of holy men, ascetics, and scholars.

Suta

A hybrid caste for someone born to one Brahmin and one Ksatriya. Often, Sutas are artists or storytellers of some type.

Lotus

A type of flower that represents beauty and growth in Hinduism.

Asram

A hermitage

Eunuch

A man who has been castrated

Bondsman

Slave

Consecration

The ritual by which a king takes his throne

Bounteous

Plentiful

Dakshina

Donation, payment for teachings

Raja

Hindu for king

Diksha

Initiation into a sacred rite

Gandharva

Celestial singer

Gandiva

Arjun's bow

Ghee

A clarified butter that is both sacred in Hinduism and a key ingredient in Indian food

Boon

A supernatural gift given to a human who has merited reward

Kanka

A bird of prey

Manta

An repetitive incantation used in devotional practices

Mahabharata Themes

Dharma

Dharma is the central theme of the *Mahabharata*. Dharma, most simply put, is the destiny and responsibility of an individual. Everyone has a different dharma, and it is his or her obligation to follow it. Yudhishthira is portrayed as a righteous king who closely follows his dharma, while Duryodhana is said to live in defiance of his dharma. Hence, the conflict between the two that drives this story acts as a parable about man's conflict between living in accordance with dharma versus failing his dharma.

Action

As outlined in the Bhagavad Gita, action is crucial to fulfilling dharma. Throughout the epic, we see characters deliberating about whether or not to take action, and ultimately almost always choosing to take the action that is in accord with their dharma. There are also a number of actions taken impulsively or out of greed, such as [Duryodhana's](#) decision to steal Yudhishthira's kingdom or Dhrtarastra's destruction of an effigy he believes is [Bhima](#). These instances show that while action is important to achieving dharma, action taken without detachment or proper consideration could result in sin and, ultimately, adharma.

Caste

Even though the *Mahabharata* focuses nearly exclusively on characters in higher, privileged castes—Brahmin, Ksatriya, Suta—the duties and dharma of those castes are profoundly important. The Pandava brothers often grapple with the dharma of their Ksatriya caste, which obliges them to be warriors and rulers often acting in conflict with more generalized principles of dharma. Much of the ethical discourse in the epic focuses on this conundrum. Characters who break with their caste are often shown in distress or committing sin, such as

when [Draupadi](#) disguises herself as a maidservant or how [Karna](#) decides to live by the dharma of the Ksatriya caste despite being a Brahmin.

The Tragedy of War

In dharma, war is considered a last resort, only to be fought when all other methods of resolving a conflict fail. Duryodhana, living in adharma, violates this tenet by seeking conflict with the Pandavas essentially from the very beginning. But the people actually fighting in the war are often conflicted about the enterprise. [Arjuna](#) initially wants to throw down his arms when he realizes how many kin he will be slaughtering, and both Bhishma and [Drona](#) desire their deaths at the hands of the Pandavas once they feel that they can no longer fight in the war honorably. The death toll of the war is massive, with less than 10 warriors left on each side when it's all said and done. The funeral pyre and river ritual in the Ganga stand as one of the most affecting segments of the epic, as we fully come to terms with the destruction the war has caused.

Gods and Humans

The blurring of boundaries between the gods and humans in the *Mahabharata* is both a recurring trope and an important theme, as it helps wed the cosmic, metaphysical aspect of Hinduism to a material, if mythical, version of humanity. The gods are frequently disguising themselves as humans or inhabiting characters in the book, while the Pandavas are commonly understood to be incarnates of the gods while the 100 Kaurava brothers are manifestations of demons. The battle between gods and demons that opens the epic quickly spills over into the human realm, and the celestial struggle between good and evil is, quite poetically, one that humans are tasked with arbitrating.

Storytelling

As the *Mahabharata* is itself a framed story, dictated by [Vyasa](#), storytelling is foundational to the epic unfolding. But even within it, all manner of parables are recited to clarify moral matters and all the major events of the epic are recited by a character as either a first- or a second-hand account. Storytelling pegs the *Mahabharata* in the oral narrative tradition, but also gives a sense of the multitude of perspectives that necessarily shape the narratives of world-important events.

Deception

Deception is an interesting theme in the *Mahabharata* since there is no decisive ethical judgment on the matter. Instead, it is used by a tool of both dharma and adharma. When Duryodhana deceives Yudhishthira into gambling away his entire kingdom and even Draupadi's freedom during the dice game, this is clearly an instance of deception committed in sin. But when [Krsna](#) offers Drstasartha an iron effigy of Bhima to maul so that he won't actually kill Bhima, this deception is carried out so that Drstasartha does not impulsively stray from his dharma.

Mahabharata Quotes and Analysis

"Moreover, that king of astonishing power and heroism who maintained purest dharma considered what would confer benefit on all people; best of all experts in dharma, Yudhishthira showed kindness to all his subjects and worked for the benefit of all, with no discrimination. So the people flourished under his paternal care, and no one hated him; hence he was known as Ajatasatru, 'Man without enemies.'"

Vaisampayan (Page 89)

While the *Mahabharata* is, in terms of content, a story about war, the book is truly a discursive text on a variety of matters. One of the central concerns of the epic is how a ruler should rule. Such is the point of this quote, articulating that a king who treats his subjects with kindness and makes no enemies will be adhering to his dharma. The subject comes up against throughout the epic, most famously during Yudhishthira's conversation with the dying Bhishma.

"Great king, if this blood from my nose had fallen on the ground, you and your kingdom would have perished, make no doubt! But I do not blame you for striking someone blameless, O king, for harshness quickly takes possession of the powerful."

Yudhishthira (Page 285)

Spoken to King Virata, Yudhishthira is forgiving the king for striking him out of rage when Yudhishthira suggests that Uttara did not save his cattle, but rather Arjuna, disguised as eunuch. Yudhishthira's act of forgiveness is a kingly one, but more important it speaks to the conflicted nature of holding power. Those in power can exercise

their whims and sometimes succumb to them, but they, just like their subjects, must be offered forgiveness from time to time.

"Even the seers are perplexed about what is action and what is inaction, so I shall explain action to you; when you know it, you will be freed from evil."

Krsna (Page 358)

This quote comes during Krsna's recitation of the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, and his explanation of action is one of the most philosophically potent and influential aspects of the Bhagavad Gita on Hindu culture and thought. Dharma is a way of life where one lives in accordance with his destiny, but action is the specific way that men exercise it, in turn abiding by their dharma and freeing themselves from evil. As Krsna will go on to explain, the best way to act is with detachment and careful consideration, but always in the way that is most clear and in harmony with dharma given a situation.

"I am Time, destroyer of worlds, fully developed, and I have set out here to bring the worlds to their end. Even without your presence in battle, all these warriors arrayed in opposing ranks will cease to be."

Krsna (Page 363)

"I am Time, destroyer of worlds," is not just the most famous and quotable line from the entire *Mahabharata*, but a beautiful, profound one that poetically if plainly states the indiscriminate nature of the cosmos. The fact that time will kill all men, even warriors who achieve glory on the battlefield, is offered to Arjuna to encourage him to carry out his dharma without concerns for the deaths he will cause. Everyone meets the same ultimate fate, yet is Arjuna's duty to *carry out* his. In this segment of the Bhagavad Gita we also get a sense of the dharma of the gods, with Krsna as time carrying out his own actions with detachment.

"Many enemy heads, with fine noses, faces and hair, free from wounds, decked with lovely earrings, their lower lips bitten in rage, flowing with much blood, covered with beautiful garlands, diadems and turbans, resplendent with diamonds and jewels, seeming like stemless lotuses, or the sun or moon, well-perfumed heads that once spoke kind words to friends, were scattered by Arjuna's son upon the earth."

Samjaya (422)

Describing Abhimanyu laying waste to the Kaurava army, Samjaya offers a decadent account of the carnage on the battlefield. This detail reminds us that these are people—human beings—who lay slaughtered, but also illustrates a kind of grandeur of this war. After all, this is slaughter that is fated, and the way these men are made up make it seem as if death on the battlefield is a resplendent occasion.

"His vital energy destroyed by a weapon, Bhurisravas, the pure and most worthy granted of boons, quit his body on the great field of battle and rose aloft, filling heaven and earth with the excellence of his dharma."

Samjaya (Page 450)

As Samjaya is describing Jayadratha leaving his body to Duryodhana, Samjaya is reminding Duryodhana of the privilege it is to die in battle, countering Duryodhana's despair over losing yet another fine warrior. The quote here illustrates the principle that for a warrior, dharma means battling, and if one dies while battling, then one's soul will ascend in dharma.

"Stretching forth both his arms, King Salya fell to the earth before the lord of dharma like a toppled Pole of Indra. The earth herself seemed to rise to greet with affection that bull-like hero, wounded in every limb as he was, and doused in blood, like a dear wife greeting her beloved as he fell upon her breast."

Samjaya (Page 536)

Here, we see the last of Duryodhana's commanders slain. Like the above quotes, this one articulates a kind of splendor and sacredness in dying during warfare, but it's also interesting for its reference to Salya as "bull-like." The bull is among the most sacred creatures in the Hindu faith, implying that Salya's death is one to be treated with deep reverence.

"All the joyful womenfolk of the lion-like Bharatas praised Krsna the stirrer of men, like shipwrecked travelers rescued by a boat; Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra, Uttara and all the other women rejoiced in their hearts. Then wrestlers, actors, prizefighters, storytellers, bedside attendants and throngs of Suta and Magadha bards all praised the stirrer of men, O bull-like heir of Bharata, and uttered blessings praising the Kure lineage."

Vaisampayana (Page 713)

In the most apocalyptic portion of the *Mahabharata*, when the world has been left in ruins by a harrowing, and as more shocking tragedies await the Pandavas, comes this celebration of life. The cycle of rebirth is central to the Hindu religion, and even in a moment of widespread devastation and death, there is still an opportunity to praise Kṛṣṇa for bringing life to the heir Parikṣit. Note that most who celebrate Kṛṣṇa here are creators, be that in a literal way as women or in a more figurative way as storytellers. These are the people who see to the sustenance and continuation of the human race.

"Cows gave birth to asses, mules to elephants, dogs to cats, and mongooses to rats. The Vṛṣṇis began to sin without shame, showing hostility to Brahmins, ancestors and gods; apart from Balarama and Kṛṣṇa the stirrer of men, they now despised their elders."

Vaisampayana (Page 712)

Here, the entire order of nature is overturned as the Vṛṣṇi people descend into sin. The shocking images serve to evoke the total state of disorder that arises from an entire society living in flagrant disregard for dharma. This passage augments the feeling that the end of the *Mahabharata* illustrates something like the end of the world.

"Now you acted deceitfully towards Drona in the matter of his son; therefore, O king, you have yourself been deceived into seeing hell."

Indra (Page 784)

This line comes during Yudhishthira's brief visit to hell before he and his brothers ascend to live in heaven. Indra reminds Yudhishthira of a deceit that he committed to explain why even Yudhishthira must spend *some* time in hell. But what this line really seems to say is that even the most virtuous individual imaginable errs in his ways. This is supposed to show us that no man is perfect in the pursuit of dharma, that striving for such perfection is a fool's errand because not even Yudhishthira could achieve it.

Mahabharata Summary and Analysis of Beginnings, The Hall, and The Forest

Summary

Book 1: Beginnings

The story begins in the age of the ruler Bharata. During his time, the world is full of people following *dharma*. This is also a time when the demons have been defeated by the gods and left powerless in the cosmos, so they begin inhabiting Earth in the form of various animals. To counteract their evil influence, the gods begin to inhabit the Earth too, taking the form of humans. Much of "Beginnings" is dedicated to discussing the lineage descending from Bharata and outlining the various types of curses suffered by people on Earth.

But the most important part of the lineage is the two brothers born of Bharata's descendent [Vyasa](#). One is Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who would become king were he not born blind, and the other is the younger Pandu, who indeed does become king. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is born 100 sons by his wife Gandhari who gives birth to a large, fleshy embryo that splits into 100 pieces, and Pandu is born five sons by a variety of women, each the incarnate of a god: [Arjuna](#), [Bhima](#), Yudhishthira, Nakula, and Sahadeva. A sixth brother, [Karna](#), is born in secret and raised by a Suta despite, like his brothers, being born into the Kṣatriya caste.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons are all demons, led by the most wicked one [Duryodhana](#), who spurns dharma, and tries many times to kill Pandu's son Bhima and, later, set Pandu's sons' house on fire to kill all five of them at once. Bhima saves his brothers and mother from the fire, and this marks a shift from playful fighting between the cousins to a more acrimonious, warlike relationship. Arjuna begins gaining power and influence around the land during a variety of sexual escapades. The five brothers marry the princess [Draupadi](#). Dhṛtarāṣṭra awards kingdoms to both Duryodhana and Yudhishthira.

Book 2: The Hall

Yudhishthira is urged by his friends and the god [Kṛṣṇa](#) to undergo a consecration ritual to elevate him from the rank of king to that of emperor. Yudhishthira rebuffs the idea that this is his dharma, but is convinced by Kṛṣṇa to defeat Jarasandha, a king who has imprisoned 84 other kings and wishes to imprison another 16 in order to sacrifice them all and increase his power. Yudhishthira, Bhima, and Arjuna sneak into Jarasandha's house in disguise and challenge him to a battle, wherein Bhima kills Jarasandha with a spear. The sound of Bhima's war cry and Jarasandha's dying wails is so strong that it causes all of the women in the area to miscarry. Yudhishthira becomes renowned for protecting the kingdom.

As he strictly follows his dharma as king, Yudhishthira reigns over a peaceful and prosperous kingdom. He decides to follow Kṛṣṇa's advice and undergo the consecration sacrifice, so he gathers all of the kings from around the land and houses them in advance of the ritual. During the ritual, the king Śiśupāla objects to the ritual on the grounds that Yudhishthira violates his own dharma and shows no respect to the other kings, but Śiśupāla's objections are ultimately dismissed and Kṛṣṇa completes Yudhishthira's consecration as emperor.

While leaving the consecration ceremony, Duryodhana makes a fool of himself by diving into a pool that's too shallow and hitting his head on a doorway. This puts him in a terrible mood that results in profound jealousy of all Yudhishthira has achieved. While consulting with a trusted advisor Śakuni, Duryodhana devises a plan to ruin Yudhishthira not through war, but through gambling. Yudhishthira cannot resist the urge to gamble, but is terrible at it, and gambles away his wealth, his kingdom, his brothers' freedom, his own freedom, and Draupadi's freedom.

Draupadi objects to becoming Duryodhana's slave, so she appeals to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who frees her and grants her boons to free Yudhishthira and Bhīma. Duryodhana is infuriated that his work has been undone, so he challenges Yudhishthira once again, this time wagering that the loser and his family must be exiled for 12 years, and live in disguise for a 13th year, with the penalty of returning to exile for another 12 years if he is recognized while incognito. Yudhishthira loses and he and his brothers are exiled.

Book 3: The Forest

The brothers live in exile while brahmins and kings find them to pay tribute. Yudhishthira complains to one of the Brahmins that he has to suffer in exile while his enemies, who are wicked people, thrive. Lomasa showers Yudhishthira with tales of fellow kings and various myths of strange births. Exile is also a time when the brothers get in a variety of conflicts and misadventures, with Bhīma often missing. Arjuna spends some time in the heavens training with Indra, learning how to use the celestial weapons. Draupadi is briefly kidnapped and won back.

During this storytelling period, Yudhishthira is told of Savitṛī, a woman who so closely abided by her own dharma that she was able to convince the god Yama to give her father-in-law his kingdom and eyesight back, and to bring her husband Satyawat back from the dead. The time in the forest concludes with Indra visiting Karna as a beggar Brahmin, asking for Karna's armor and earrings. Karna obliges him, and in return, Indra gives Karna a spear like the one that Bhīma had in the first book, that will be guaranteed to kill an enemy of Karna's choosing in battle.

Analysis

The early books of the *Mahabharata* sweep through a massive story spanning both generations of a royal family and a wide swath of humanity. The first book of the story, "Beginnings," introduces an epic tale that is as much worldly as it is cosmic. Similar to other foundational epics in human literature from other cultures—the *Iliad* for the Greeks, the Old Testament for the Jews—the *Mahabharata* starts out on matters concerning the gods, and those matters come to concern humans and the earth insofar as the interests of those higher beings spill over into this material realm.

Also similarly to those other epics, the *Mahabharata* unfolds as a series of narrated stories and parables. Such framing devices exist for two reasons. First, it anchors the story firmly within the cosmic realm, as one of the recurring themes of the epic that emerges is that all events are fated, prescribed by powerful gods. And much as a god, according to this epic, knows exactly the course of events that is destined, so too does a storyteller know the end of a story when he begins to tell it. The very philosophy of fate in Hinduism is determined by this structure.

The second reason for the framing device is a historical one. The *Mahabharata* was written down at a time when the oral narrative tradition was dominant, and its structure as a series of stories recited from one person to another reflects that spoken tradition. Hence, the role of the storyteller is always important on a narrative level; without that narrator, there would be no narrative. Hence, we have the character of Vyasa, who is said to be the descendent of Bharata who has the two sons—Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pandu—whose own sons will embark on the war that is the locus of the *Mahabharata*. Vyasa is widely understood to be the scribe of the *Mahabharata*, and is considered one of the seven immortal beings in the Hindu faith. The link between the divine and the storyteller, here, is an explicit and crucial one.

The early books introduce the key theme of *dharma* that will run throughout the epic, but frequently does so by means of counterpoint. For example, we get parables of characters committing *adharma* (or violations of

dharma committed out of greed), as well as the Pandava's suffering that comes from Yudhisthira following dharma and losing his entire kingdom in a dice game. How the exile is crucial to Yudhisthira's dharma, and how Duryodhana pursues devious methods of stealing Yudhisthira's kingdom, will not just drive the story of the *Mahabharata*, but provide entry to its greatest ethical questions and lessons.

Mahabharata Summary and Analysis of : Virata, Perseverance, and Bhishma

Summary

Book 4: Virata

During the brothers' 13th year in exile, they must live in disguise, and will suffer another 12 years in exile if they are detected. They decide to take residence in the court of King Virata, each assuming a secret identity that will endear them to the king. Yudhisthira assumes the identity of a brahmin and skilled gambler, [Bhima](#) becomes a skilled cook, [Arjuna](#) poses as a eunuch, Nakula will act as a horse trainer, and Sahadeva will herd the cattle. [Draupadi](#) poses as a maidservant skilled at hairdressing so she can maintain her independence. Virata ecstatically receives them, well aware that these are not typical people posing in their roles.

While in the kingdom, Draupadi attracts the attention of Kicaka, who tries to rape her in an attempt to make her his. Draupadi, after suffering multiple indignities as a princess in disguise, appeals to Virata, who is unsympathetic since he didn't witness the attack. Bhima, though, agrees to help Draupadi, and kills Kicaka, mangling his body in the manner only a *Gandharva* could. Kicaka's kinsmen find the dead Kicaka and immediately conclude that Draupadi is to blame, so they appeal to Virata to let them burn her on Kicaka's funeral pyre, and Virata assents. When Draupadi is bound and taken by Kicaka's kinsmen, Bhima slaughters all 105 of them in the forest. Virata, fearing the wrath of the Gandharvas, frees Draupadi, but Draupadi urges him to let her stay for another 13 days, which will please the Gandharvas.

During this year, Virata's son Uttara is accosted by [Duryodhana](#)'s men, who try to steal his cattle. Arjuna heroically accompanies Uttara and saves his cattle, but Arjuna almost gives up his identity to his opponents. Virata hears that Uttara has saved his cattle, and Yudhisthira infuriates the king when he says that the eunuch is to thank for the deed. Virata strikes Yudhisthira and gives him a bloody nose, but Yudhisthira doesn't let the blood fall on the floor, so that he does not have to seek retribution for the assault. When Uttara returns, he confirms that the eunuch saved the day. Soon after, the 13th year is over, and the five brothers and Draupadi reveal their real identities. Virata offers them his kingdom. Arjuna's son Abhimanyu marries Virata's daughter.

Book 5: Perseverance

With the 13 years of exile over, Yudhisthira is now becoming aware that Duryodhana has little intention to return his rightful half of the kingdom. [Krsna](#) instructs Yudhisthira to go plead a case for a peaceful transfer of power and, in the event that Duryodhana refuses, to then declare war. Yudhisthira and his brother Bhima are reluctant to go to war, while Draupadi demands war to make right for the indignities and humiliation she suffered during the 13 years of exile imposed by Duryodhana. Visnu promises that even though he would supply men to Duryodhana, he will throw his support behind Yudhisthira and his brothers.

Yudhisthira follows Krsna's instructions and appeals to Duryodhana for a peaceful transfer, but Duryodhana refuses. Krsna implores Dhrtarastra to keep his son from initiating a war and destroying the Bharata lineage, telling him that Duryodhana and Yudhisthira could rule together in peace. Dhrtarastra is won over, and appeals to his son, even bringing in his Duryodhana's mother Princess Gandhari to reprimand him for his foolishness. Even Bhishma disagrees that Duryodhana should go to war with the Pandavas.

Nevertheless, Duryodhana is resolved to go to war. Krsna appeals to [Karna](#) to join the Pandavas, noting that he is technically the eldest son of Pandu. But Karna refuses, saying he was abandoned by his mother, that Duryodhana has been good to him and it is too late to change allegiances. As the war grows closer, Duryodhana appoints Bhishma as his commander, and Yudhisthira appoints Draupadi's brother Dhristadyumna as his own. Arjuna reminds Yudhisthira that he could destroy Duryodhana's forces instantaneously with a celestial weapon, but that it would be improper. The two sides march to battle.

Book 6: Bhishma

As the battle begins, both Duryodhana and Yudhisthira put forth fearsome, massive armies. Arjuna instructs Krsna to drive his chariot above the battlefield so that he gets a good view of the beginnings of the battle. Arjuna then throws down his weapons in despair over the fact that so many of his kin are about to meet their destruction. Krsna then explains the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, giving him a comprehensive explanation of his dharma. As Krsna explains, it's Arjuna's responsibility to act on his own dharma with detachment, since actions

are what will result in Krsna's goodwill. Krsna then shows Arjuna his true godly form, and Arjuna is appreciative and awestruck.

The battle begins with Yudhisthira asking for permission from the leaders of the opposing force to face them in battle. Those leaders all admit that they are beholden to Duryodhana's army by money, but that they give Yudhisthira his blessing to fight them and wish him victory. The fighting is bloody from the start, with Bhishma showering the Pandava forces with arrows. The fortunes of the two forces are constantly changing. The Pandavas have a fearful army, and Duryodhana suffers injuries in battle, but the tables turn and Bhishma also suffers injuries. At first, Duryodhana is pleased by Bhishma's resolve to defeat the Pandavas, but soon grows impatient and threatens to replace with Bhishma with Karna.

Throughout the first 10 days of battle, Krsna and Arjuna clash over Arjuna's pledge to kill Bhishma, and there are a few times Arjuna has to stop Krsna from killing Bhishma himself, lest he break his vow to not fight in the war. Despite Bhishma killing thousands of Pandava soldiers, he grows tired of killing, and communicates to Yudhisthira that he desires his dharma of being killed in battle. This is when Yudhisthira sends Arjuna and his men to kill Bhishma, and they rain arrows on him. Bhishma chooses to delay the day of his death, as he lays in pain on a bed of arrows, asking Arjuna to prop up his head and feed him water. While Bhishma lays in agony on the bed of arrows, Karna asks for his permission to fight.

Analysis

In Book 6, "Bhishma," Krsna recites the Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the most historically and culturally significant portion of the *Mahabharata* for the Hindu religion and its society. Many go so far as to consider the Bhagavad Gita the "fifth Veda," treating it like a crucial fifth amendment to the original four Vedic texts which outline the mythology and ethics of the Hindu religion. The Bhagavad Gita stands as not just an important treatise on dharma, but as the only text in the ancient Hindu tradition that expounds on individual action, and an individual's personal responsibilities when acting on behalf of their dharma. It would become increasingly important to the Hindu faith during the Middle Ages, and informed Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy and methods during the Indian independence movement in the 20th century.

As the scholar Lourens Minnema points out, the Bhagavad Gita essentially centers on a contradiction. Arjuna is a member of the Ksatriya caste and is one of the most fearsome warriors in the world, meaning that it is his dharma to wage war on behalf of his righteous brother, Yudhisthira. But Arjuna looks down at the battlefield and recognizes many of his kin, and wants to throw down his arms. The conflict between Arjuna's adherence to his personal dharma and the more generalized dharma tenets—which preach non-violence and compromise—inspire Krsna to recite the Bhagavad Gita to explain Arjuna's obligations and resolve the moral quandary.

As Minnema notes, Krsna does this by helping Arjuna recognize matters of scale. There are the immediate concerns of the individual, and then there are the greater concerns of fate and the cosmos. Krsna makes a point that by following his own personal dharma—as every man should—Arjuna is in fact satisfying what fate has designed for him. To act in any other way, be that by another man's dharma or by tenets that do not apply to oneself, would be to violate that dharma and commit a sin.

Action is central to Krsna's formulation of dharma, as Krsna explains to Arjuna that only through action does a man fulfill his dharma. He recommends that Arjuna undertake those actions with detachment, freeing his own personal desires from his need to perform the duties of dharma. Minnema points out that desire is highlighted in the Bhagavad Gita as the main thing that undermines acting in dharma, highlighting that dharma is as much a sense of duty as it is an acknowledgment of destiny.

Mahabharata Summary and Analysis of Drona, Karna, and Salva

Summary

Book 7: [Drona](#)

With Bhishma vanquished, [Duryodhana](#) appoints Drona as his commander. Drona is in his 80s, but fights like he is 16. He is also the man who taught [Arjuna](#) how to fight. Duryodhana demands that Drona kidnap Yudhisthira and bring him to Duryodhana. Killing Yudhisthira would infuriate Arjuna and cause him to avenge his brother's death, but if Yudhisthira is kidnapped then Duryodhana can defeat him in another game of dice. Drona vows to capture Yudhisthira, but this will mean distracting Arjuna so that Yudhisthira is left unprotected.

After attempting this capture and failing, Drona then promises Yudhishthira that he will kill one of the key Pandavas. This results in a campaign where Drona and [Karna](#) team up on Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son. After a trying battle between Karna and Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son is ultimately killed, sending shockwaves across the battlefield. When Arjuna learns of his son's death, he vows to kill Jayadratha, who had attempted to molest [Draupadi](#) during the Pandavas' time in exile. Drona resumes his attempts to kidnap Yudhishthira, but is now tasked with protecting Jayadratha as well.

When Arjuna and Drona meet in battle, Arjuna backs away in the name of pursuing Karna instead. Drona taunts Arjuna, asking why he would leave without killing his enemy, and Arjuna tells Drona that he is not an enemy, but his teacher. After a series of Pandava losses on the battlefield, [Bhima](#) goes to fight Drona himself and lays waste to Drona's armies. In the midst of the chaos, Yudhishthira is left unprotected, making him vulnerable to being captured. When Arjuna learns of this, he finds himself in quite the bind. He must protect Yudhishthira and kill Jayadratha, yet the sun is setting.

Arjuna beheads Jayadratha with an arrow and parades around the arrow with Jayadratha's severed head attached. As retribution, Karna kills Ghatotkaca with a weapon he originally intended to use on Arjuna, but decides against because it would invite too great retribution. The Pandavas then devise a plan to kill Drona: Bhima tells him that he has killed Asvatthaman. Asvatthaman is the name of Drona's son, but Bhima is playing a sly trick, referring to an elephant that he just killed on the battlefield. In a fit of rage, Drona violates his dharma and kills tens of thousands of soldiers. When confronted with his violation of dharma, Drona lays down his arms and prays that Karna stays protected. Drona accepts his death at the hands of Dhrstadyumna, and the Pandavas celebrate a massive victory.

Book 8: Karna

Upon learning of Drona's death, Duryodhana finally grasps the gravity of his errors for provoking the Pandava brothers. He appoints Karna, who is resolved to kill Arjuna. Salya tries to dissuade Karna from going into battle with Arjuna since Arjuna and [Krsna](#) are invincible and have more powerful weapons, but Karna shows his bitterness when he recounts the time when he himself sought the cosmic weapons only to see them given to Arjuna instead. Karna swears to kill Arjuna with his own weapons. After a short period of fighting, Yudhishthira and Arjuna get in a spat over the fact that Arjuna has yet to kill Karna, which results in Arjuna having to be talked out of Yudhishthira, Yudhishthira suffering Arjuna's rudeness and vowing to abdicate his kingdom to Bhima, and the two ultimately resolving their issues to join forces again.

When Arjuna does finally meet Karna on the battlefield, the fight is protracted and bloody. Arjuna systemically brutalizes Karna by destroying his armor and eventually his body. Whenever Karna fires arrows at Arjuna, Arjuna cuts those arrows. In response to Karna using his own most powerful weapons, Arjuna unleashes the Weapons of Indra, and these end up killing Karna. There's a chilling image after Karna's death of his spirit descending from his body.

Book 9: Salya

Duryodhana is devastated by the death of Karna and begins to realize that his efforts are doomed. On the recommendation of his confidants, he appoints Salya, the Madra king and the new commander of the army, to continue the fighting. Early on, everyone is evenly matched, with Asvatthaman fighting Arjuna as an equal. This changes when Yudhishthira becomes infuriated that Salya is the new commander, and he vows to kill the king personally himself. Yudhishthira meets Salya in the battlefield and shows a new rage, which leads him to defeat Salya handily with arrows.

Following Salya's death, Duryodhana instructs his armies to continue fighting, either for victory or for a glorious death. Packs of Duryodhana's soldiers then begin attacking the Pandavas without Duryodhana's express permission. When the Pandavas go looking for Duryodhana to kill him, they can not find him and retreat for the night. But soon enough, Bhima learns that Duryodhana is hiding in a lake, and the brothers go there and challenge him. The grounds of the challenge are that if Duryodhana can kill one of the Pandavas with a weapon of his choosing, he will get the kingdom back. He agrees, and chooses a club. Bhima volunteers to fight first, but Krsna warns him that he may lose, as Duryodhana may outsmart him. Bhima chooses to fight anyway.

Balarama suddenly returns from a pilgrimage—and the story is briefly interrupted to tell of his pilgrimage encountering various gods—and suggests that the fight is staged at Samantapanacka, since any warrior who dies there is guaranteed to go to heaven. The battle ends quickly, after Bhima strikes Duryodhana below the navel, killing him. Balarama is infuriated, since this is a forbidden form of fighting, and claims Bhima violated

dharma. Duryodhana, while dying, protests Bhima's strike as well, but Kṛṣṇa gives the final ruling on dharma, saying that Duryodhana had acted in adharma since the beginning, and that the Pandavas were acting in dharma by fighting him in a war and defeating him. While Duryodhana ultimately accepts his death, Asvatthaman is infuriated by the way both his father and Duryodhana were killed, and desires retribution.

Analysis

V.S. Sukthankar, one of the preeminent scholars of the *Mahabharata*, explores the rich and sometimes contradictory nature of how this war is depicted in his book *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. He states that, like with Homer's *Iliad*, the tragedy of the *Mahabharata* is a massively destructive war that is, at the end of the day, an excessive act born out of a provocation that was incommensurate with the cost. In both epics, the world is effectively destroyed by a war that should not have transpired in the first place. The war at the center of the *Mahabharata* was not inevitable but, instead, entirely avoidable.

It's these type of essential contradictions that drive the story in the epic and also set up its most potent and pertinent character interactions. The battle between Arjuna and Drona is not positioned as that between the righteous and the sinner like the battle between their respective kings Yudhisthira and Duryodhana is, but rather as the meeting on the battlefield between two fearsome warriors who share a deep kinship. As Drona is Arjuna's former mentor, there is a mutual respect between them. Dharma pervades this teacher–pupil relationship as they now must fulfill their individual dharmas as warriors by confronting each other on behalf of the forces they represent.

Drona is portrayed as a somewhat paradoxical character. He is an 85-year-old that fights like he's 16, and he is the commander of an army fighting on behalf of the wicked Duryodhana yet himself commands respect. As Sukthankar notes, Drona is portrayed as wearing white, the "color of purity and equanimity." How can Drona himself be so pure, so righteous, if he fights on behalf of a force of evil? Here, we should leave aside any Judeo-Christian notions of good and evil. Drona is not beholden to fight for the righteous, but to abide by his own dharma and fulfill his fate.

Drona does not violate his dharma by fighting on behalf of Duryodhana, but by needlessly slaying. He lays down his arms to accept his fate, as giving himself over to his rightful death is the virtuous move. The idea that a soldier's death on the battlefield is a virtuous one recurs with the deaths of all of Duryodhana's commanders: be it with the spectacular image of Karna's soul ascending from his body or with the negative example of Duryodhana hiding in a lake to escape the impending death that is rightfully his. In all of these cases, death is not portrayed as something accidental or incidental, but as an inevitable event preordained by some greater force. For a warrior, accepting that death is acting with detachment in the name of dharma.

Mahabharata Summary and Analysis of The Night-Raid, The Woman, and Tranquility

Summary

Book 10: The Night-Raid

Among the only Kauravas remaining, Kṛpa, Kṛtavarma, and Asvatthaman gather to mourn their profound losses and certain defeat now that [Duryodhana](#) is dying. Asvatthaman, though, is still interested in seeking retribution. The other two try to discourage him, reminding him that Duryodhana had acted in adharma and invited all the harm that came the Kauravas way. But Asvatthaman retorts that he has been a brahmin choosing to live by ksatriya dharma, and he will continue to do so.

Asvatthaman then goes to the gates of the Pandava camp seeking entry. He is met by a terrible beast wearing a tiger-skin garment woven with a snake, spewing fire from every part of its face. When Asvatthaman tries to battle it, the faces of [Kṛṣṇa](#) multiply and overwhelm him. Asvatthaman then summons Siva to aid him in defeating this creature, offering himself as a sacrifice at Siva's altar. Siva inhabits Asvatthaman's body, and he enters the camp.

For the first several people who Asvatthaman murders, he strangles them with his foot, killing them with indignity like animal sacrifices, and therefore denying them entry into heaven as warriors. It's only as he continues his slaughter that he meets people noble enough that he considers it proper to slaughter them like warriors. Upon leaving the camp, he tells Kṛpa and Kṛtavarma that he killed all the Pandavas, and they report the same to the dying Duryodhana, who dies shortly after this update. Asvatthaman then unleashes a weapon that makes all the Pandava wombs barren, which leads to him being cursed by Kṛṣṇa to wander the rest of his life in hunger and suffering, having committed sinful acts of adharma.

Book 11: The Women

Dhrtarastra, deep in grief over his sons, asks Vidura how he may free himself from this abject suffering. Vidura describes the wheel of life, wherein a man who righteously follows the path of dharma is reincarnated higher and higher until he is freed and allowed to enter heaven. Dhrtarastra asks if he should take his own life for encouraging his sons to go to war, and Vidura tells him that the entire war, including Duryodhana's and the other sons' deaths, was all preordained, and therefore Dhrtarastra should take comfort in fate and not take his own life.

Yudhishthira visits Dhrtarastra, but is confronted by women who demand to know how he could have been acting in dharma by slaughtering all of their husbands, sons, and brothers. Dhrtarastra receives Yudhishthira since, even though he is devastated, he knows Yudhishthira is righteous. But when Dhrtarastra sees [Bhima](#), he is filled with rage and attempts to kill him. Krsna tricks Dhrtarastra and offers him an iron effigy of Bhima, which Dhrtarastra smashes until blood pours out of it. Dhrtarastra is quickly overcome by grief over what he's done, but Krsna informs him that he only broke an effigy, and that Krsna had offered it to him to prevent him from carrying out an act of sin out of rage. Once again, Dhrtarastra is spared.

The women mourn the Kauravas, piling their bodies with various kinds of tinder to make a funeral pyre. When it's alight, the women shower it with ghee. After the funeral pyre, the women go to the Ganga river to perform river rituals, and Yudhishthira joins them in the ritual to take part in the mourning. The Pandavas' mother tells them that [Karna](#) was their brother, and they are dumbstruck. Yudhishthira is stricken with grief, and weeps at the river.

Book 12: Tranquility

Yudhishthira asks Narada why Karna was condemned to death, and Narada recounts how Karna consistently chose to ally himself with Duryodhana even when given many chances to join the Pandavas. In deep grieving, Yudhishthira declares that he wants to give up his kingdom to [Arjuna](#), and go live an ascetic life in the woods. Arjuna reminds him that it is not the Ksatriya dharma to live an ascetic life, and that Yudhishthira must take up his throne. When Yudhishthira does finally take up his throne, he lets all return to his kingdom and gives various gifts to honor his subjects. He agrees to obey the elder Dhrtarastra.

Yudhishthira and the other Pandavas then travel to consult with the dying Bhishma, who has put off his death for a great number of days. The remainder of this book is dedicated to a discursive, philosophical monologue by Bhishma on the various tenets of the king's duties and, more generally, dharma. Throughout he uses parables to illustrate his lessons. Bhishma describes to Yudhishthira how a king must always act in his own interests as a king, and operate with a general mistrust of those around him. The ruler's dharma is to rule to the best of his judgment.

When describing dharma more generally, Bhishma speaks of the merit of planning ahead and deliberating before taking action. When Yudhishthira asks how a man should wish to exist in the cycle of being reborn, Bhishma says that men should hope to be freed from living on a flawed earth, and use wisdom to follow actions that will help them fulfill dharma and escape living. They talk about the nature of time and the cosmos, of dharma and adharma, and of release.

Analysis

With the fearsome war concluded, the *Mahabharata*'s narrative effectively pauses for a series of passages that are the most explicitly discursive in the entire epic. Of course, the *Mahabharata* is, overall, a didactic text, but in the preceding books, it often teaches its lessons through allegory. Yet in this post-war segment, that discursive bent appears as philosophical conversation, as the format of the Bhagavad Gita is reiterated and expanded by way of other characters.

For example, we have the conversation between the grieving Dhrtarastra and Vidura. Dhrtarastra is distressed over his inability to keep his sons from embarking on this terrible war, and asks if he should take his own life. What results is an explanation from Vidura about the nature of fate, as he tells Dhrtarastra that the war, as well as his sons' deaths, was preordained.

Were we to read all those gruesome books about mass slaughter and wonder what exactly the *Mahabharata* is supposed to tell us, here Vidura tells us explicitly how war ties into Hindu faith and philosophy. This makes the *Mahabharata* unique from its closest analog, Homer's *Iliad*, in that it portrays events and then provides commentary on them. In Homer's text, the relevance of specific events in the war are constantly discussed throughout the narrative, but in the *Mahabharata*, we have these extra-narrative passages which help us unpack the narrative.

Consider the *Mahabharata* within the context of the other Hindu texts. This one is the only narrative of the bunch, meaning that the more explicitly philosophical passages are in fact the more familiar form within that early literary tradition. This helps explain why so much of the post-war segment of the *Mahabharata* is dedicated to a conversation between Yudhisthira and the dying Bhishma. In these passages, specific precepts for everything from a king's duty to the nature of living well are outlined in a way that reflects another ancient Greek text: Plato's *Symposium*. Perhaps it helps to think of the *Mahabharata* less as a perfect analog to the *Iliad*, but as a hybrid of a narrative war epic and a didactic text, performing the double duty of what Homer and Plato did individually.

Mahabharata Summary and Analysis of Instruction, The Horse Sacrifice, The Hermitage

Summary

Book 13: Instruction

Yudhisthira continues his conversation with Bhishma, now focusing on all that it takes to live life well. They discuss tranquility, the virtues of devotion and compassion, and the danger of giving instruction to someone from a lower caste. They also discuss more explicitly religious matters, such as the 1,000 names of Siva and how one can only become a brahmin through rebirth. This is when Bhishma tells Yudhisthira that the role of kings is to honor and protect brahmins.

They also talk about women. The conversation starts off talking about their capricious nature, as well as their tendencies towards deceit and wrongdoing. Bhishma then goes on to outline the various arrangements for marriage and the terms for how a girl should be married. Naturally, this leads to a conversation about bearing children and various other domestic matters. The conversation returns to how a king can rule well, and goes through a series of questions Yudhisthira has about giving gifts and the virtues of giving cattle. Their dialogue concludes with explanations of heaven, hell, and honor.

Upon the conclusion of their conversation, Yudhisthira takes up his kingship. After ruling for 50 days, he sets out to bring Bhishma the preparations for his cremation. Bhishma tells Dhrtarastra that he should consider the Pandavas his own sons, and that he should not mourn his wicked sons who have gone to hell. [Krsna](#) then gives Bhishma the blessing to die. He takes a yogic breath and his body heals of all wounds before this soul shoots out of his head into the heavens. Bhishma's mother, the goddess Ganga, mourns his death until Krsna reminds her that Bhishma only took the form of a man because of a curse.

Book 14: The Horse Sacrifice

Yudhisthira is again overcome with grief. Dhrtarastra tells him not to grieve, since he only acted righteously, while Krsna chides him for desiring the life of an ascetic despite acting totally within his ksatriya dharma during the war. Krsna reminds Yudhisthira to ignore desire, which is a distracting and flawed impulse in humans. He advises that Yudhisthira perform a horse sacrifice. Yudhisthira agrees it would purify the earth, but can not afford it, since he spent all of his wealth on the war. Krsna tells him to go to Mount Himalaya to find the wealth he needs that he left there during a brahmin sacrifice.

Krsna visits the ascetic Vasudeva to tell him of the war, and when Vasudeva deduces that Krsna has omitted talking about the death of Abhimanyu, the ascetic grows infuriated. But Krsna quells him, saying that he is the creator, and he is in all men, just as all men are in him. As if to demonstrate this principle, Krsna then goes to visit Abhinmayu's widow, who is to give birth to Abhimanyu's stillborn son due to the curse placed on Pandava women by Asvatthaman. Krsna gives that stillborn son life, and people come from all around to sing his praises.

Yudhisthira secures the white horse that will be used for the sacrifice ceremony, and sends [Arjuna](#) to travel the world on it, retracing all of the battlegrounds of the terrible war. During this journey, Arjuna encounters a number of enemies with whom he does battle, and all of whom try to intercept or kill the sacrificial horse. Yudhisthira rejoices when Arjuna returns, and the horse becomes the center of a sacrifice of 300 animals carried out by brahmin priests. The smoke from the horses's cooking intestinal sac purifies the entire earth. A mongoose emerges to denounce the animal sacrifice as needless. With the ritual having been performed the world is now cleansed and Yudhisthira can take his rightful throne.

Book 15: The Hermitage

As king, Yudhishthira mandates that Dhrtarastra and Gandhari be treated with utmost reverence, and gives them accommodations to live lavishly. He demands that all of the Pandavas treat them well, but [Bhima](#) disobeys in secret, never forgiving Dhrtarastra for the imprudence that led to that precipitous dice game. After 15 years, Dhrtarastra appeals to Yudhishthira to let him and Gandhari go to live out their remaining years as ascetics in the forest, just as Ksatriyas are supposed to do when their son takes control of the kingdom.

Yudhishthira is shocked to learn that Dhrtarastra is so unhappy living in his kingdom, but is ultimately convinced by Vidura to grant them their wish. He sends Dhrtarastra, Gandhari, the Pandava's mother Kunti, Vidura, and Samjaya to the forest with brahmins, seers, slaves, and all manner of riches. After a period of time, the Pandava brothers are despondent over their mother's departure, so they set out on an expedition to visit the forest-dwellers. There, Yudhishthira finds a dying Vidura, and offers to cremate his body, but instructed not to, for Vidura's body is Yudhishthira's too.

During their time in the hermitage, [Vyasa](#) summons all of the Kaurava warriors who died in the great war. They appear in the Ganga free of enmity, and Vyasa tells their wives to plunge in the river and reunite with their husbands. Blind all his life, Dhrtarastra can see his sons for the first time, in their true form. The Pandavas return to their kingdom, and after a period of time, are visited by Narada.

Narada informs Yudhishthira that a fire consumed the hermitage, and killed all of the elders living ascetically. Yudhishthira mourns Dhrtarastra, who died an undignified death, as well as his mother, who he imagines terrified in her final moments. But Narada informs him that it was a sacred fire initially set by Dhrtarastra, and that his mother has attained perfection in death. The Pandavas carry out the proper funerary rites for the dead, but Yudhishthira rules cheerlessly, with most of his closest relatives and kin deceased.

Analysis

In his introduction to the Penguin abridged edition of the *Mahabharata*, John D. Smith asks why a full third of the epic—the final third of the verses—is dedicated to discussing so *few* events. After all, the first two-thirds of the book depicting the lead-up to the war and the war itself are action-packed, with a litany of adventures and allegories, of conflict and confrontation. But the final third is largely dedicated to, as previously mentioned, didactic conversation. Smith posits that Bhishma's extensive conversation with Yudhishthira is a result of the encyclopedic tendencies of the *Mahabharata*.

On one hand, this means that compilers of the epic felt the need to have it describe just about every matter that a ksatriya or brahmin may have to consider in the course of life. But on the other, as Smith points out, that encyclopedic tendency extends to addressing and evaluating both sides of various debates that were likely occurring at the time of the *Mahabharata*'s writing. Bhishma talks about both Samkhya and Yoga in "Instruction," which are two differing philosophical systems within Hindu thought, and Smith remarks on the fact that the epic remarks on both of these somewhat conflicting schools of thought without trying to reconcile them.

Smith traces this tendency throughout the final books of the epic, noting the ambivalent portrayal of animal sacrifice. Arjuna's final glory occurs during his trip around the world on the white horse that will be sacrificed to purify the earth, and indeed these adventures are portrayed as awe-inspiring. The same holds true for the preparations of the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. All of this is an awesome spectacle. Yet, at the end of the sacrifice, a mongoose denounces the ritual killing of animals as pointless. Smith notes that this is the strange conflicted nature of the *Mahabharata*'s didactic segments, as the text tends to offer all perspectives on some matters without arbitrating them.

With all of this said, the final third of the *Mahabharata* is not without crucial narrative. Just after the horse sacrifice, the elders in the Bharata line retreat to a forest hermitage to die as ascetics. They are consumed by a fire initially set by Dhrtarastra. When Yudhishthira learns of this, he is hysterical over the idea of his mother dying in terror, but Narada reminds Yudhishthira that his mother attained perfection in death. Here, we see the narrative and the philosophical blended perfectly, as the epic's tendency towards allegory makes an allegory out of its central characters, illustrating how human emotion and experience so easily bristle against the spiritual tenets of Hinduism.

Mahabharata Summary and Analysis of The Clubs, The Great Journey, The Ascent to Heaven

Summary

Book 16: The Clubs

The Pandavas learn from Vaisampayana about the downfall of Vrsnis and [Krsna](#)'s death. They're shocked to hear about both of these and wish to learn how it all happened. Vaisampayana starts by talking about the Vrsnis, who have become aware of their impending destruction at the hands of Time. They descend into all manner of bizarre happenings and reckless sin, so Krsna impels them to take a pilgrimage to the ocean. During this pilgrimage, the Vrsnis have a drinking party which turns into a massive melee, with them fashioning clubs out of anything they grab. With these clubs, they kill each other, destroying everybody. Krsna is despondent at first, but knew all along that this would be their fate. He went wandering into the deserted forest and, before too long, decided that it was his time to die as well. Krsna uses yoga to restrain his senses, and is shot by the hunter Jara (meaning "old age" in Sanskrit). Jara, at first, thinks he committed a terrible crime, but Krsna assures him he did nothing wrong as he ascends to heaven. There, Krsna joins all the other gods.

[Arjuna](#) goes to find Vasudeva to confirm the news, and Vasudeva says that Krsna said Arjuna would come, for Arjuna and Krsna are one. After Arjuna performs Krsna's funerary rites, he leads a caravan of Vrsni women. Without Krsna, Arjuna is not able to defend the women from a pack of thieves who raid their caravan. Thousands of Vrsni women are abducted. Arjuna becomes abject, and visits [Vyasa](#), telling him that he has lost his prowess. Vyasa tells Arjuna that Time does and undoes all, and that as a man grows mighty, he will eventually grow powerless. Vyasa assures Arjuna that he has done well, and Arjuna returns to the Pandavas to tell them of his defeat.

Book 17: The Great Journey

When Yudhishthira hears of Krsna's passing, he resolves that it is his time to pass as well. The Pandava brothers agree that Time, ruler of all, has dictated that they should all pass. Yudhishthira consecrates Abhimanyu's son Pariksit as king of his kingdom, and convinces his subjects that the time has come for him to step down. He leads his brothers into the forest, where the god Fire compels Arjuna to give up his cosmic weapons, now that he has no use for them.

The brothers and [Draupadi](#), devoted to Yoga, hope to travel the entire earth. But as they cross the northern mountains, each of them begins to die one by one, starting with Draupadi. For each that falls, Yudhishthira offers [Bhima](#) a flaw of theirs that contributed to their death. Finally, Bhima himself falls, leaving Yudhishthira alone. Indra comes down from the heavens on a chariot and commands Yudhishthira to mount it. Yudhishthira demands from Indra that he let him take the dog that had followed the Pandavas, as this is the only living creature remaining, and he does not want to abandon a creature so loyal. The dog then transforms into the god of dharma and praises Yudhishthira, saying he has achieved the highest celestial state even in his own body. When he arrives in heaven, he finds that none of his brothers nor Draupadi are there. He tells Indra that he can't bear to be without them, and wants to go wherever they are.

Book 18: The Ascent to Heaven

Upon arrival to heaven, Yudhishthira finds only [Duryodhana](#) and grows quickly indignant. He asks why a man whose shortsightedness and envy caused so much death would gain entry to heaven, but not any of the Pandavas, or [Karna](#), or any brahmins, or any of the brave kings who fought righteously in the war. Yudhishthira declares that he wants to be wherever his brothers are, so the gods instruct him to go there. The path he follows is riddled with darkness and horrors, such as human hair growing where there should be moss and flesh and blood where there should be mud. He sees various men being tortured for their sins, and hears his brothers call out in voices as wicked as the place where he stands. In anger, he denounces the gods and dharma, and says to leave him there in hell so he can give his brothers company.

Indra then tells Yudhishthira that all kings must see hell, but since he and his brothers have lived virtuously, they will simply visit hell first before living in heaven. Yudhishthira is sent to heaven with his brothers, Draupadi, Karna, and all the kings who were slain in his name in battle. At the end, Vyasa sings a hymn to dharma.

Analysis

Critical literature on the *Mahabharata* often draws parallels between this epic and another ancient epic poem that tells of a gruesome war, Homer's *Iliad*. But what we see in "The Clubs" perhaps is best likened not to that Greek epic, but to the "Book of Revelations" in the Christian New Testament. Both "The Clubs" and "The Book of Revelations" illustrate a surreal apocalypse, when a condemned section of humanity awaits its demise. Nature falls into disorder, and everything familiar is made strange.

In "The Clubs" and "The Ascent to Heaven" alike, we are presented with freakish inversions of the everyday. In "The Clubs," various animals are portrayed as giving birth to other animals, and everyday objects are suddenly transformed into deadly clubs during a drunken brawl that ends in the annihilation of all the men involved. In "The Ascent to Heaven," Yudhishthira enters hell and sees human hair grow where there should be moss, and flesh and blood where there should be mud. The *Mahabharata* portrays grotesque landscapes for grotesque people. Sinners, by living life in defiance of their dharma and fate, inherit versions of the world that defy logic and order.

If the prior depictions of war had desensitized us to violence in battle by perpetually deeming its events the due course of preordained fate, then these images do the opposite. They are intended to shock the audience, to provide the most extreme example of what happens to people who live their lives in contempt of that very fate. But hell, as "The Ascent to Heaven" makes clear, is not simply reserved for the wicked. All of the Pandavas spend some time there, despite the fact that they were gods incarnate, despite the fact that they vanquished the evil Duryodhana.

The *Mahabharata* concludes on what may strike the reader as an odd moral. In one respect, it seems to tell us that even the most righteous are condemned—that even the most virtuous have their moment in hell. But that's the glass-half-empty read. The more optimistic and charitable interpretation of the epic's conclusion is that, yes, even the most virtuous king who has ever existed had his time in hell, but only before he entered heaven. It construes hell as a gruesome place where you wouldn't want to spend eternity, compelling the audience to live a life that ensures they only spend a brief time in their afterlife to hell, and to illustrate that even if you live a life that condemns you to hell for a little bit, it may still be one that lands you in heaven.

Mahabharata Symbols, Allegory and Motifs

Lotus (Symbol)

The lotus plant has a long-running significance in the Hindu faith. The flower is often used to evoke beauty, but it can also represent a kind of blossoming of the soul. Often in the *Mahabharata*, the lotus is described as an adornment to someone's garb or as a decoration in a house.

Snakes (Motif)

Snakes appear over and over throughout the book, from the giant sacrifice of snakes in a fire to the stitching on tiger-skin garment worn by a terrifying monster guarding the Pandava camp. Throughout the book, snakes represent something dangerous yet not entirely wicked. We read stories of people getting turned into snakes or having to encounter snakes, and while there is always some trouble afoot, it's clear that these creatures are nonetheless dominated by humans.

The Kauravas Birth (Allegory)

The Kauravas are born when their mother Gandhari gives birth to a single embryo, which she splits amongst 100 pots, each of which bears a son. The unnatural and unsettling nature of the Kauravas' birth foreshadows an unholy existence lived in adharma, and the tale stands as an allegory of how evil can quite literally multiply when fostered by people who are acting out of greed. Here, those people are Dhritrashtra and Gandhari, who are not capable of bearing children but defy what should be their dharma to remain childless and bring the children into existence regardless.

Fire (Motif)

Fire recurs throughout the *Mahabharata* in moments of destruction, but modulates based on the merit of that destruction. For example, early on Duryodhana tries to burn down the Pandava brothers' house to kill them, and he is clearly acting in adharma. But we also see funeral pyres, sacrificial fires, and various supernatural characters spewing fire. In these situations, fire is conjured as a force that draws a link between the material world and the cosmos, be that by the gods demonstrating their awesome powers using fire or by humans making offerings to the celestial beings to consecrate various rites.

The Clubs (Allegory)

While the *Mahabharata* is full of allegorical tales meant to demonstrate some ethical conundrum or dictate a moral, "The Clubs" is the only book in the epic almost entirely dedicated to one such allegory. It portrays the Vrsnis, who face imminent destruction by Time and descend into a sinful free-for-all. They cast aside all decorum and dharma, committing to drunkenness and violence as the world turns increasingly bizarre around them. The story illustrates an apocalypse, allegorically depicting how the world is turned upside down when societies decide to live in defiance of virtuous and dharma. Contrast this allegory with the elders descended from Bharata who assent to their demise by choosing to live out their days as ascetics in the forest hermitage.

Mahabharata Metaphors and Similes

"Goddess Ganga, the divine lovely river that flows through the three worlds" (Metaphor)

Early in the book, we encounter a parable of the Goddess Ganga seducing the great creator Indra. Like in many celestial origin stories, a goddess is used to embody the principle of fertility that fosters all of existence, and the metaphor likening her to a river links the cosmos with the very nature to which it gives birth.

"Fate robs us of wisdom as sudden glare robs us of sight." (Simile)

Yudhisthira utters this before his doomed gambling match with Duryodhana. He knows that it is his destiny to enter this gambling match, that it is how he will fulfill his dharma, and this simile shows how fate will stun better judgment. Importantly, Yudhisthira does not draw the comparison to temporary blindness to *denounce* fate, but simply to illustrate his own powerlessness in the face of it.

"Then she wept ceaselessly, till her face shone as bright as the disc of the moon in the sky when it emerges from a cloud-bank." (Simile)

Here, Draupadi's tears when she is continually wronged during her time in exile is likened to a celestial phenomena, partially to illustrate the depth of her pain, but also to draw yet another analogy between the key Pandavas and the greater cosmic forces which rule the world.

"You are so stupid that you want to seize him, like a child who wants the moon!" (Simile)

In "Perseverance," Dhrtarastra reprimands his son Duryodhana for seeking war against Yudhisthira, likening him to a child that wants the moon. He extends the simile by saying that you cannot touch the moon with your hand and you cannot seize the wind with your hand, meaning that Duryodhana is attempting to manipulate forces that are far greater and more powerful than any human can control.

"But today I shall fulfill my second vow by slaying Duryodhana like a sacrificial beast!" (Simile)

Bhima says this to Krsna and Arjuna after Karna's death. While at first it may seem like a superficial simile—Duryodhana must be sacrificed like an animal to end the war—remember that animal sacrifice is handled with ambivalence in this epic. After the horse sacrifice in a later book, a mongoose denounces animal sacrifice as pointless. Therefore, there is also an interpretation of the simile that Bhima's desire to kill Duryodhana like a sacrificial beast is an expression of his excessively violent character.

Mahabharata Irony

The Five Brothers' Disguises (Situational Irony)

In their 13th year of exile, the five Pandava brothers and Draupadi decide to go in disguise in a fellow king's court. These disguises are all ironic given their real identities, providing one of the few explicitly comic episodes in this epic. Yudhisthira, for example, poses as a brahmin who is also a skilled gambler, ironic because gambling is how he lost everything and was exiled in the first place. Draupadi becomes a maidservant, ironic because she can still enjoy similar freedom to what she enjoyed as a princess, but at the exact opposite end of the social ladder. Arjuna poses as a eunuch and Bhima as a cook, both meant to provide winking counterpoints to their real identities as deadly warriors, inverting their hyper-masculine identities by assuming more feminine roles.

Karna, The Secret Pandava (Dramatic Irony)

The big secret at the heart of the warfare between the Pandavas and the Kauravas is that Karna is the eldest son of Pandu, and therefore a blood relative of the Pandava brothers who he is fighting. While he is well aware of this, and repeatedly refuses to reject Duryodhana and join his brothers on account of being abandoned by his father, the other Pandavas are not. Yudhisthira is dumbstruck by grief when he learns that Karna was one of his own, for this drives home an essential fact of war that Arjuna was initially weary of: that warfare occurs between kin. While that fact is made quite literal here, imbuing the clash with a tragic irony, this could be understood as an allegorical conceit meant to illustrate that *all* warfare is warfare between brothers.

The Ksatriya's Dharma (Dramatic Irony)

One of the essential ironies of the epic is the dharma of the ksatriya caste, which destines them to wage terrible war, existing in direct conflict with the more generalized dharma to commit no acts of violence. Krsna's recitation of the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna during the early part of the war is a key portion of the text, not just for explaining this conflicted dharma, but for elucidating how a person is supposed to fulfill his dharma. While perhaps still ironic, Krsna explains that Arjuna's dharma is not in conflict with anything, since every man has

his own dharma and must act in accordance with his dharma and no one else's. Only by acting with detachment when fulfilling his duties can Arjuna achieve his dharma.

Duryodhana Hides in a Lake (Situational Irony)

When the Kauravas' defeat is certain, Duryodhana flees the conflict and hides in a lake to escape his own certain death. This move is deeply ironic, as it mirrors the Pandava's prior exile to the woods. Just as Duryodhana had forced those five brothers to flee into a remote part of the Earth, so does he himself. The irony illustrates how Duryodhana is getting his comeuppance in the midst of an act of cowardice.

Mahabharata Imagery

Yudhisthira's Heavenly Hall

There's a slapstick moment immediately following Yudhisthira's consecration when Duryodhana tries to exit the great hall but constantly mistakes what he's walking into. He twice pulls up his garments because he thinks that the floor is a pool of water, only to fall in an actual pool of water that he mistakes for elaborate decoration. When he's leaving, he hits his head on an open door that he thinks is closed, then stands in front of a closed door he thinks is open. The image of Duryodhana having such a difficult time assessing the material reality of the room—and becoming the butt of the joke to Arjuna and Bhima—speaks to the fundamentally mistaken way that Duryodhana sees and assesses the world.

Krsna's True Body

At the end of the section when Krsna recites the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, Krsna reveals his true body, and Arjuna is awestruck by its ornamentation and how it contains the gods. In Krsna's body, he sees the infinitude of gods and a brilliance of light he's never known before. Here, in the midst of a battle, the image of Krsna's true body is used to remind us of the profound difference between gods and men, and to remind Arjuna of the awesome power dictating his destiny.

Karna's Slain Body

When Karna is killed, his body is discussed in the language of awe-inspiring phenomena one might find in nature. His body is described as looking like a thunderstruck mountain, and his blood is described as flowing with mineral ore. He can be seen blazing with a fiery energy that shoots up into the sky. The image of Karna, in death, imposing his surroundings like a mountain and flowing into the sky is yet another conflation of the human with the godly, and a reminder of the blessed stock that Karna descends from.

The Funeral Pyre

When Duryodhana's body is burned in a funeral pyre along with the other Kauravas, the pyre is described "looking like planets in a cloudless sky." The spectacular image of the pyre is likened to a cosmic phenomenon to illustrate how profound, how extraordinarily significant, the war that just ended seemed to be. It suggests a scale great than the earthly or the human.

Mahabharata Tragedy and Time in The Mahabharata

The comparative literature scholar Lourens Minnema wrote a fascinating book on tragedy called *Tragic Views of the Human Condition*, in which he traces approaches to tragedy in Shakespeare's plays, Homer's *Iliad*, and the *Mahabharata*. His inquiry across all of these different incarnations of tragic literature concerns commonalities and divergences across narrative, literary style, socio-political concerns, religion, ethics, and more. It's a useful source for scholarship on both the specific literature Minnema writes about and tragedy, more generally, as a genre.

One of the most fascinating discussions of the *Mahabharata* in Minnema's book concerns the relationship between tragedy and time. In Western narratives, he writes, time helps processes unfold, as events change and characters' relationship with their circumstances evolve. Consider Hamlet's developing feud with Claudius in *Hamlet* or the narrative trajectory of the war in the *Iliad*. In both of these situations, the plots concern problems in need of solutions, which characters learning both the nature of the conflicts in which they are embroiled and either rising to the occasion to confront them, or crumbling under the pressure of the circumstances. The tragedy stems from the unforeseeable, as characters progress within a situation only to learn that something has gone terribly awry along the way.

In the *Mahabharata*, time and tragedy have a different relationship. Minnema uses [Arjuna's](#) feelings about the great war as an illustrative example of how time does not help events evolve or characters come to a new understanding of them, but instead simply ushers along events whose ending is foretold. As Minnema

explains, Arjuna is well aware that the war he is about to fight will be a bleak enterprise, as gruesome as it is unnecessary. His misgivings spur [Krsna](#) to recite the Bhagavad Gita to him, and Krsna's message is clear. Arjuna's participation in the war is his fate, and the war's outcome is preordained. It is not Arjuna's duty to make the right decision or even to influence the course of the events to follow. Rather, it is Arjuna's duty to act in the exact capacity he is fated to act.

Time, in this case, is simply a vector for Arjuna coming to terms with his role and duties. Such is the case for all the characters embroiled in this war. Minnema makes the pertinent observation that almost all of the major warriors — be they [Duryodhana](#)'s commanders, Dhrtarastra, or the Pandavas—understand exactly how fruitless the violence will prove, as they all know the outcome of the war well in advance. The war is ultimately a means for these men to come to terms with their dharma and act in accordance with it.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krsna invokes his own mighty power with the line, "I am Time, destroyer of worlds." The conception of time that is related to dharma is effectively one stemming from the simple principle that every person knows he will die, that everything in the world is finite, that Time makes and undoes all that exists in the world. Tragedy is not an act of discovery as time progresses, but simply the senseless violence that transpires as time passes. Perhaps the true tragedy in the *Mahabharata* is that these characters with all their human afflictions and affections are in fact powerless, that the virtuous Yudhishthira and the wicked Duryodhana are both fated—one to live in heaven and one in hell, but fated nonetheless.

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Mahabharata Literary Elements

Genre

Epic Poem

Setting and Context

India, circa the Iron Age

Narrator and Point of View

The epic is told through a series of narrators, creating a framed, nested narrative.

Tone and Mood

Bellicose and spiritual

Protagonist and Antagonist

Yudhishthira (protagonist) and Duryodhana (antagonist)

Major Conflict

Duryodhana instigates a war with Yudhishthira and his brothers over the rights to the brothers' kingdom.

Climax

An 18 day blood war between the Pandavas and Kauravas that destroys the world

Foreshadowing

Characters are often told of their predestined fates, such as Arjuna's duty to slay thousands in the war

Understatement

Allusions

Imagery

Multiple instances of souls ascending to heaven from dead bodies, such as Karna's and Bhishma's

Paradox

Yudhishthira feels compelled by dharma to participate in the dice game even though he knows he's a terrible gambler and will lose everything.

Parallelism

Metonymy and Synecdoche

The Pandavas are gods incarnate, and their fighting is therefore the will of the gods

Personification

An effigy of Bhima is offered to Dhrtarastra to maul, and the effigy bleeds like a person